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Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE JAN 2007		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2007 to 00-00-2007	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Ending Afghanistan's Civil War				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Rand Corporation,1776 Main Street,PO Box 2138,Santa Monica,CA,90407-2138				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES The original document contains color images.					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 11	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

TESTIMONY

Ending Afghanistan's Civil War

JAMES DOBBINS

CT-271

January 2007

Testimony presented before the House Armed Services Committee on January 30, 2007

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Published 2007 by the RAND Corporation
1776 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA 90407-2138
1200 South Hayes Street, Arlington, VA 22202-5050
4570 Fifth Avenue, Suite 600, Pittsburgh, PA 15213

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James Dobbins¹
The RAND Corporation

Ending Afghanistan's Civil War

**Before the Committee on Armed Services
United States House of Representatives**

January 30, 2007

The resurgence of civil war in Afghanistan can be attributed to two fundamental causes. One is the failure of the United States, the Karzai government, and the international community as a whole to take advantage of the lull in that conflict that followed the collapse of the Taleban regime in late 2001 to strengthen the capacity of the new Afghan government to project its authority and provide public services, including security, to the population beyond Kabul. The second cause is the fragmentation of the international coalition that the United States put together in late 2001 to stabilize and reconstruct Afghanistan.

Afghanistan has experienced civil war since the late 1970's. Unlike the conflict that raged in Yugoslavia in the 1990's, or the one underway in Iraq today, both of which principally derive from deep seated hostility among their constituent religious, ethnic and linguistic communities, Afghanistan's war has largely been the product of external influences. In the 1980s the Soviet Union and the United States chose Afghanistan as a battleground in their global competition. In the 1990s Pakistan, India, Russia and Iran supported competing Afghan factions in order to protect and extend their influence in the region. Relations among Afghanistan's various ethnic, religious and linguistic communities have become much more difficult as the conflict progressed, but these tensions are more the result of civil war than its cause.

Americans tend to recall that, in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the Bush Administration formed a multinational coalition that drove the Taleban from power. It is more accurate, however, to state that in late 2001, the United States joined an existing coalition that had been fighting the Taleban for half a decade. That coalition consisted of Russia, India, Iran, and the Northern Alliance. With the addition of American airpower, and the withdrawal of Pakistani support for their opponent, that coalition prevailed. Northern Alliance troops, who had been equipped, trained and paid by Russia, India and Iran, occupied most of the country.

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If credit for America's military victory in Afghanistan needs to be shared with this unlikely coalition, so must America's diplomatic achievement in rapidly installing a broadly based successor regime. When named as the American envoy to the Afghan opposition October of 2001, I quickly concluded that the United States could not succeed in halting civil war in Afghanistan, however successful we might be in ousting the Taleban, without the support of the very governments responsible for that war in the first place. This belief stemmed from my own experience a few years earlier in the Balkans, and in particular from observation of the success Richard Holbrooke had achieved in 1995 in orchestrating the Dayton negotiations that ended the civil war in Bosnia. That war had been the product of Serbian and Croatian ambitions. Presidents Milosevic and Tudjman had been personally guilty of the genocide we were trying to stop. Only by engaging them, bringing them to the conference table, and making them partners in the peace process were we able to persuade all the Bosnian factions to lay down their arms. I believed that something similar would be needed to achieve a comparable result in Afghanistan.

By November of 2001 we were working with the United Nations to bring all factions of the Afghan opposition together in Bonn, where we hoped they would agree upon an interim constitution and the membership of a new government. The UN's initial inclination had been to tightly sequester the Afghan representatives from all outside contacts in order to prevent foreign government from exerting malign influence over their deliberations. I made the opposite case, arguing that it was only by bringing governments like Iran, Pakistan, India and Russia into the process that we had some chance of securing a positive outcome. In my view the Afghans would only reconcile their differences if they were subjected to convergent pressures from all their foreign sponsors and supporters.

And this was, in fact, exactly how it worked out. Each of those governments, and particularly Russia and Iran, played positive and essential roles in forging the compromises upon which the Afghans ultimately agreed.

Pakistan was also present at the Bonn Conference. This meeting was, in large measure, a gathering of its former adversaries, which made the Pakistani position at Bonn rather uncomfortable. Nevertheless, Pakistan's acquiescence in the process, and support for the result was essential to its prospects for longevity.

In the aftermath of this collective achievement, the United States and the rest of the international community had a golden occasion to help Afghans build an effective government capable of providing its population with the most basic public services. Al Qaeda was smashed, its remnants

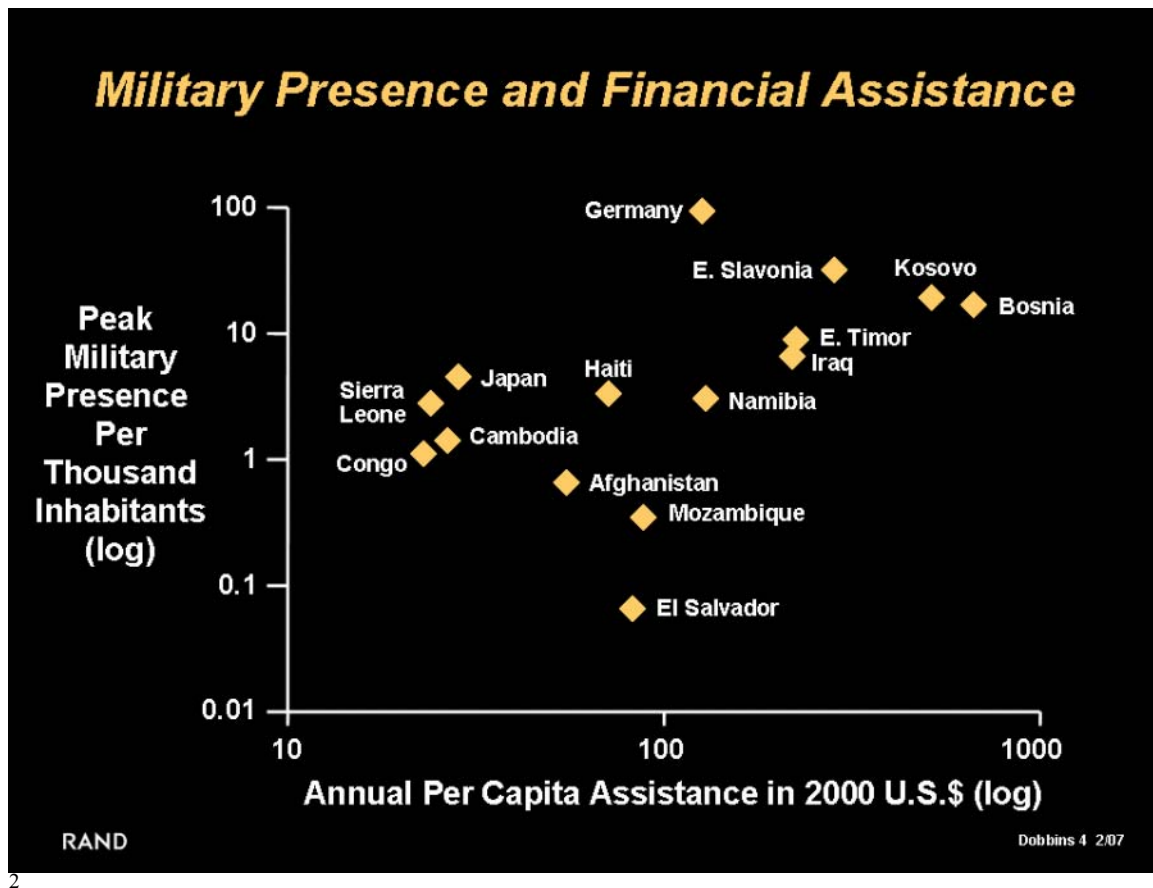
in hiding. The Taleban was discredited in Afghanistan and dispersed in Pakistan. Neither was capable of posing an immediate threat to the new regime in Kabul.

We failed to seize this opportunity. During those early years US and international assistance was minimal. Blame for this failure must be widely shared, but the minimalist approach did reflect the American Administrations early aversion to nation building. Well into 2003 the Administration was quite vocal in touting the merits of its “low profile, small footprint” alternative to the more robust nation building efforts that the Clinton Administration had led in Bosnia and Kosovo. Top Administration officials argued that generous international assistance had caused those Balkan societies to become inordinately dependent upon external funding and foreign troops, something the new U.S. Administration intended to avoid in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

In pursuit of this severely limited vision of nation building, the United States initially sought to minimize the size, geographical scope and functions of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Washington rejected pleas from Karzai and the UN to deploy these international peacekeepers outside Kabul. The Administration discouraged any role for NATO in Afghanistan. It also refused to assign peacekeeping functions American forces operating throughout the country. Security for the Afghan population was to remain the responsibility of regional warlords until a new Afghan national army could be recruited, trained and deployed, a process which would necessarily take years complete.

Economic assistance to Afghanistan was also commensurately low. In the first year following the collapse of the Taleban, the United States committed some \$500 million in reconstruction aid to Afghanistan. Compare that figure to the \$18 billion in economic assistance the Administration requested for Iraq, a country of comparable size, much greater wealth, and much less damaged, in 2003. The rest of the international community did not do much better. Counting all sources, the average Afghan received about \$50 in foreign aid in each of the first two years following the installation of the Kazai regime. By comparison, the average Kosovar had received ten times more assistance and the average Bosnian twelve times more assistance over a comparable period.

As is indicated in the chart below, showing troop and financial commitments to fifteen US and UN led nation building operations over the past sixty years, Afghanistan was the least resourced of any major American led nation building operation since the end of WWII.



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Not surprisingly, when one invests low levels of military manpower and economic assistance in post-conflict reconstruction, what one gets is low levels of security and economic growth. This was the experience in Afghanistan. In major combat operations it has proved possible to substitute firepower and technology for manpower, enabling smaller, more agile forces to very rapidly prevail over much larger, less advanced adversaries. This defense transformation paradigm yields very unsatisfactory results when applied to the next stage of operations, however. Experience has also shown that in stabilization and reconstruction operations, there is no substitute for manpower, money, and time.

By 2004, the Administration began to recognize these realities and started to increase its aid and military manning levels accordingly. US assistance climbed steeply. So did US troop levels. NATO was invited to take over the ISAF mission. International peacekeepers were at last dispatched to the provinces.

² *The UN's Role in Nation-Building: From the Congo to Iraq*, Dobbins et al, RAND, 2005

Two vital years had been lost however, years during which little progress had been made in extending effective governance to the countryside. As a result, when the Taleban and other anti regime elements again began to mount attacks into Afghanistan, the population in the affected areas had been given little incentive to risk their lives on behalf of a government that could neither protect them nor advance their material well being.

This history explains why anti-regime insurgents have found some receptivity among the local population to their efforts to overturn the Karzai regime and expel the international presence. It does not explain why this threat has reemerged. The current insurgency in Afghanistan does not arise from a profound disaffection among large elements of the Afghan population with their government. This insurgency has been raised in Pakistan, but individuals resident in Pakistan, some of whom are refugees from Afghanistan, others of whom are native Pakistanis. For the tens of millions of Pashtun tribesmen on both sides of the current border, the distinction between Afghan and Pakistani is, indeed, of little import, as neither they, nor the government of Afghanistan, for that matter, recognize the current border between the two countries as legitimate.

Most Afghan Pashtuns do not support the insurgency, but nearly all insurgents are Pashtuns. The insurgency is organized, funded, trained and directed from Pakistan, where most Pashtuns live, and where most Pashtuns have always lived. Pashtuns believe themselves to represent a majority of the Afghan population, and claim a predominant role in that countries government.

Lt. Gen. Karl Eikenberry, the senior U.S. commander in Afghanistan, reported in early 2007 that the number of suicide attacks had increased by more than 400 percent from 27 in 2005 to 139 in 2006. Remotely detonated bombings had more than doubled from 783 to 1,677, and armed attacks nearly tripled from 1,558 to 4,542. This violence led to more than 4,000 deaths in Afghanistan last year. Last year was by far the bloodiest year in the country since 2001. Today, the Taliban has infiltrated villages in the south and east of Afghanistan, and are expected to mount major operations in Kandahar, Helmand, and other provinces this spring. Their ability to use Pakistan as a sanctuary has been critical. Interviews with U.S., NATO, and UN officials indicate that the Taliban regularly ship arms, ammunition, and supplies into Afghanistan from Pakistan. Most suicide bombers came from Afghan refugee camps located in Pakistan. Components for improvised explosive devices are often smuggled across the Afghan-Pakistan border and assemble at safe houses in such provinces as Kandahar

The degree of official Pakistani complicity in this insurgency is a matter of some controversy. Speaking in private, knowledgeable US, NATO, Afghan and UN officials are nearly unanimous in

asserting that the Pakistani intelligence service continues to collaborate with the Taleban and other insurgent groups operating out of its border regions. For its part, the Pakistani government, at the highest levels, denies any official sanction for these activities, suggesting that, at most, these reports reflect the activity of former members of its intelligence service acting independently and against government policy.

The U.S. Administration has complained loudly about Iranian support for sectarian violence in Iraq. At this point, lacking access to the intelligence data, it is difficult to fully assess the degree of official Iranian support for civil war in Iraq, or official Pakistani support for civil war in Afghanistan. What seems indisputably clear, however, is that Pakistani citizens, residents, money and territory are playing a much greater role in the Afghan civil war than are Iranian citizens, residents, money or territory in the Iraqi civil war.

The RAND Corporation has conducted a several studies on nation building and counterinsurgency drawing on the experience from dozens of American and non-American led operations over the past century. Among the principal conclusions that can be drawn from these historical surveys is the extreme difficulty in putting together broken societies without the support of neighboring states, and the near impossibility of suppressing well established insurgencies that enjoy external support and neighboring sanctuary. The validity of this lesson is evident today both in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Pakistan has both geopolitical and domestic political incentives for destabilizing its neighbor. Geopolitically, Pakistan fears an independent Afghan state aligned with India. Domestically, Pakistani elites would prefer to see Pashtun ambitions externalized, in the pursuit of power in Afghanistan, rather than turned inward, in the pursuit of greater autonomy, or even independence for Pashtunistan. Even if these considerations do not lead Pakistani officials to actually foment civil war in Afghanistan, they can diminish that government's commitment to helping suppress such activities. The United States and the rest of the international community therefore need to work to offset these incentives with a more persuasive array of counter-incentives designed to lead Pakistan to assert effective control over its own territory and population and prevent either from being used against its neighbor.

Often one hears that the decision to invade Iraq in 2003 diverted American manpower and money from Afghanistan. This may be true. But a more serious charge is that the conflict in Iraq has diverted American attention from the real central front in the war on terror, which neither in Iraq or Afghanistan, but in Pakistan. Al Qaeda, after all, is headquartered in Pakistan. The Taleban is operating out of Pakistan, as are several other insurgent and terrorist groups seeking to expel

international forces from Afghanistan. Ben Laden lives in Pakistan. Mullah Omar lives in Pakistan. It was Pakistan that assisted the North Korean and Iranian nuclear programs. Potential terrorists in Western societies still travel to Pakistan for inspiration, guidance, support and direction.

Yet if Pakistan is the central front in the war on terror, it is not one susceptible to a military response. We are not going to bomb Islamabad or invade Waziristan. An increase in US military manpower and money for Afghanistan may contain the renewed insurgency and prevent the Karzai government from being overthrown. But the US and NATO troops are likely to be required there indefinitely as long as the Taleban and the other insurgent groups are able to recruit, train, raise funds and organize their operations in Pakistan.

Afghanistan has never been a self sufficient state, and it probably never will be. It is simply too poor to be able to raise the revenues necessary to provide security and effective governance to a large and dispersed population. So unless the Pakistani government can be persuaded to abandon its relationship with extremist elements within its society, halt its support for terrorism, provide its youth an educational alternative to fundamentalist madrasas, extend effective governance into its border provinces, and curtail their use by insurgent movements, the United States and its allies are going to be compelled to patrol Afghanistan's Southeast Frontier indefinitely, just Great Britain was compelled to conduct a counterinsurgency campaign along that same frontier, from the other side, throughout much of the 19th century.

As I have noted, Pakistan is not a problem susceptible to a military solution. Therefore other sources of influence will need to be used. First the United States should intensify quite efforts to encourage both India and Pakistan to resolve their differences over Kashmir, that dispute being the root cause of radicalization in Pakistani society and governments use of terrorism as an instrument of state policy. Second, our assistance programs need to address the economic and social needs of the Pashtun populations on both sides of the border, not just in Afghanistan. There is only limited benefit in winning the hearts and minds of Pashtuns resident in Afghanistan if the larger number of Pashtuns living in Pakistan remain hostile and ungoverned. Third, we need to encourage both the Afghan and Pakistani governments to establish an agreed border regime and legitimize the current frontier. And finally, the U.S. should encourage Pakistan to move back toward civilian rule via free elections. Fundamentalist parties have never fared well in such elections in Pakistan, and are unlikely to do so in the future. It seems ironic that the U.S. has pushed for democratization in Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon, all places where the result was likely to intensify sectarian conflict, but has largely failed to do so in Pakistan, where the opposite result is more likely.

American efforts alone, no matter how intense and skillful, will not be sufficient to achieve any of these objectives. Washington therefore needs to raise the profile of the Pakistan problem internationally, in order to secure a much wider array of pressures upon and of assistance to Pakistan in undertaking these transformations.

At present NATO is manning the Afghan frontier, but doing nothing to address the threat emerging from its other side. This is akin to NATO's guarding the Fulda Gap throughout the Cold War, but having no agreed policies for dealing with the Soviet Union. In fact, consultations about the Soviet Union occupied 90% of the every NATO Ministerial and Summit for 40 years. Its time consultations on Pakistan occupied a similarly central place in the transatlantic dialogue.

The recent announcement that the Administration intends to increase its troop and financial commitment to Afghanistan should be welcomed. These steps come five years late, but perhaps not too late. American commitments now need to be supported by similar contributions from other NATO countries. Some countries, such as Canada and Britain, have been willing to fight against Taliban strongholds in such provinces as Kandahar and Helmand. But most NATO countries continue to have national caveats that severely restrict their ability to fight. In addition, several coalition countries lack adequate enabler forces—including attack and lift helicopters, smart munitions, intelligence, engineers, medical, logistics, and digital command and control—to fully leverage and sustain their ground combat power.

The Afghan people desperately want peace, and they continue to hope that their freely elected government, the United States and NATO can bring it to them. We continue to be welcome in Afghanistan in a way we are not in Iraq. But public support for Karzai, his government, and our presence is diminishing. These additional commitments should be able to reverse, or at least slow this negative trend. The more American money and manpower is committed to Afghanistan, however, the more important it become to address the principal source of the ongoing civil war, which remains, as it has for most of the past 20 years, largely external, and in present circumstances, largely in Pakistan.